

A Decade after “Theorizing NGOs”: The Entanglement of State, Feminism, and Neoliberalism

Victoria Bernal & Inderpal Grewal. *Theorizing NGOs: States, Feminisms, and Neoliberalism*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2014.

This anthology on the global state of NGOs and feminist activism brings together previously unpublished research and reprints of earlier work. The chapters discuss a wide range of contexts, including NGOs run by women for women and NGOs that incorporate work with women within a broader agenda and bring perspectives from Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. A central issue debated by the book is a phenomenon described by its critics as the “NGOization of feminism,” namely the transformation of feminist activism that followed the NGO boom of the 1990s (Lang 1997; Alvarez 1999). This process has arguably transformed feminism into a depoliticized, donor-dependent, project-based activity that is not only compatible with neoliberalism but actively promotes the formation of neoliberal subjects. This has been attributed to aspects of NGO work as diverse as the focus on entrepreneurship of many aid NGOs and normalizing the idea of a neoliberal state by taking over the delivery of previously state-provided social welfare. The editors do not frame the book as a history of NGOization, but rather as an open discussion of how feminist activism fares in this transformed environment bringing new opportunities and limitations.

Another issue addressed by the volume is how the global North-South divide structures unequal access to power and resources for NGOs and feminist activists. The book affords considerable attention to Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space – three out of 11 chapters focus on Eastern Europe and Russia (Helms, Hemment, Grünberg), and a fourth discusses the post-enlargement EU (Lang). Despite this, the volume struggles to situate the region within the North-South paradigm, oscillating between assuming Eastern European exceptionalism and implicitly subsuming the region under the global South. For example, the editorial introduction speaks of “North-South relations – or, in the case of Eastern Europe, East-West histories,” understanding both frameworks as related to unequal access to power but somehow unconnected to each other. On the other hand, the editors and several contributors understand Eastern European countries as places where donor agendas formulated in the global North dismiss local priorities, but without an explicit positioning of the region within this paradigm. It should be noted, however, that the publication of the volume precedes more recent debates that have questioned the continued positioning of Eastern Europe as the former “Second World” external to global colonial histories that have led to the formation of the North-South divide.

The book has three thematic sections. The first, “NGOs Beyond Success or Failure,” focuses on the relations between NGOs, civil society, states, and social movements and explores some of the unintended outcomes of the work of NGOs in the field. Elissa Helms discusses the proliferation of women’s NGOs in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, where international donor agendas promoted a reduced state and facilitated the creation of professionalized NGO cadres. Nevertheless, Helms argues that promoting gender equality NGOs in a context that lacked a strong history of feminist organizing enabled the emergence of feminist activism rather than precluded it, as the NGOization hypothesis would have it. Discussing Maoist insurgency in rural Nepal, Lauren Leve asks whether popular support for the rebellion resulted from a failure of development, as defined by Western liberal discourse, or was perhaps its inadvertent result. Leaning towards the latter, Leve considers the role played by NGO-run women’s literacy courses in producing subjects that were more likely to support Maoist visions of social justice. Aradhana Sharma draws on research with an Indian government-organized women’s NGO (GONGO) to explore how governance is reconfigured in the relationship between the NGO, the state, and neoliberalism. Sharma suggests that the neoliberal governmentalization of empowerment resulting from this collaboration brings both risks and unexpected possibilities.

Section II, “Postcolonial Neoliberalisms and the NGO Form,” looks at how the work of NGOs, which operate in a neoliberal context, can reproduce social divisions and neglect local concerns by privileging donor-supported agendas formulated in the global North. Julie Hemment examines some of the contradictory effects of the focus on violence against women in international development, using the example of women’s crisis centers in post-Soviet Russia. The author argues that the issue of violence, which succeeded in uniting women from the global North and South, simultaneously silenced local concerns and ignored the effects of post-socialist economic dislocation. Hemment’s otherwise convincing analysis, however, relies on the global North-South paradigm without explicitly discussing Russia’s position in this dichotomy. Kathleen O’Reilly describes negotiations over the meaning of women’s participation that took place in an Indian NGO that aimed to empower women by involving them in water supply management while at the same time marginalizing their female staff. O’Reilly understands participation as a flexible notion defined not in policy documents and project plans but in dialogic exchanges between project actors of unequal power. LeeRay M. Costa compares rural women’s activism with the activism of urban middle- and upper-class women in Thailand. The author argues that rural women’s concerns regarding class, ethnicity, and cultural difference situate their interests differently from those of elite urban women and concludes that power and difference continue to undermine women’s attempts at solidarity. Lamia Karim examines how the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize winner, the Grameen Bank, and several leading NGOs in Bangladesh mobilize pre-existing notions of honor and shame to ensure microcredit loan repay-

ments. Within a system of collective responsibility for individual loans (taken out by women but used mainly by their male kin), women's honor acts as loan collateral in what Karim calls an "economy of shame."

Section III, "Feminist Social Movements and NGOs," addresses the relationship between different forms of feminist organizing, particularly the idea that the proliferation of NGOs working on women's issues has weakened feminism's political edge. Saida Hodžić considers NGOization an evaluative rather than a descriptive term and argues that the "NGOization paradigm" shapes feminist knowledge in ways that limit our understanding of NGOs. Drawing on research about women's organizing in Ghana, the author suggests that anti-institutionalism, the idea that feminists should be working against rather than with the state, is not universal. Hodžić locates it in the global North and the academy and claims this is not without epistemological and geopolitical implications, which privilege Northern perspectives. Laura Grünberg provides a personal account of establishing a women's NGO in post-socialist Romania and describes a steep learning curve in assuming NGO management and adopting the language of international donors, "an almost magical, alienated, specialized language," (p. 262) and the frustration of chasing ever-shifting funding priorities. Sabine Lang, one of the first scholars to discuss the NGOization of feminism, revisits the issue in an essay about women's advocacy networks in the European Union. Lang demonstrates how EU governance structures privilege institutional advocacy over loose, informal alliances and discourage public voice and participation. Therefore, Lang identifies movement building and creating feminist publics as a vital task for the future. Sonia E. Alvarez, another key scholar in the NGOization debate, revisits her earlier work on Latin America. The author maintains that even at the height of the "NGO boom," most women's NGOs continued to produce and disseminate feminist knowledge and served as key nodes in feminist fields that connected disparate actors. Furthermore, Alvarez notes that in the 2000s, numerous NGOs re-focused on public outreach and "movement work."

Read together, the chapters reveal the NGO to be a flexible form crucially shaped but not fully determined by its relations with the state and neoliberalism. They show that although so-called NGOization changed relations between feminism and the state, this impact differs depending on context. Furthermore, it did not only foreclose options available to feminist activists but could sometimes open new possibilities. The volume also shows how involved NGOs have become in the very processes of constructing gender, not just serving or mobilizing women but producing new categories of women through their work, such as "grassroots women" and "trafficked women." The chapters do not speak with one voice, but that can be considered a strength of the book, which sheds light on the relationship between feminism and NGOs from different perspectives. While this slightly older collection of essays can no longer be read as a survey of the current state of feminist activism within NGOs, it remains relevant due to

the continued influence of both neoliberalism and NGOs on feminist organizing and women's lives. It gains particular significance when read against the backdrop of recent "anti-gender" campaigns that often select NGOs as one of their targets.

References

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Jelena Košinaga
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Borderlands in European Gender Studies: Feminisms of Postsocialist Europe

Teresa Kulawik & Zhanna Kravchenko. *Borderlands in European Gender Studies: Beyond the East-West Frontier*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2020.

Borderlands in European Gender Studies: Beyond the East-West Frontier, edited by Teresa Kulawik and Zhanna Kravchenko, is a book that arose from a 2011 conference entitled *Why Is There No Happiness in the East? The Making of European Gender Studies*, at the University of Södertörn in Stockholm. The discussions at the conference mainly tackled the duality between Eastern and Western feminisms within the larger scope of gender studies. Aside from the introduction and epilogue, the book is organized into three parts, comprising ten chapters altogether. The volume introduces "a critical analytical perspective of Europe as borderland" (1) by delving into the advantages and limitations of feminist theorizing of the borderlands that go beyond the East/West dichotomy. This way of theorizing represents a form of critical thinking foregrounded on the personal narratives of the contributors as well as their contextualization within "nation-specific contexts and intellectual traditions" (26) that comprise the multiple approaches of gender, temporality, location, sexuality, and so on.

The first part of the book, "Bringing in the second Other," explores possibilities of how we can bridge the gap between the Eastern and Western feminist scholarship and gives voice to the second Other of Europe. In this context, the "second Other" refers to what was initially designated as the Second World, the Cold War conceptualization of the socialist states in-between poverty and wealth. In her chapter, Marina Hughson borrows the ideas from world-systems theory to argue for semiperiphery's contextual perception in